

Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)**SciVerse ScienceDirect**

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 78 (2013) 81 – 85

---

---

**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

---

---

PSIWORLD 2012

# Cognitive Representation of Academic Assessment in Romania. A Qualitative Analysis

Victorita Trif\*

*University of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, 90 Panduri Avenue, Bucharest, 050657, Romania*

---

## Abstract

This paper related to cognitive representation of assessment in Romania discusses the issues of assessment from the semiotic perspective in order to negotiate the meaning of the wide range of errors identified. The purpose is to identify the cognitive representation regarding the assessment in Romania, to analyse the interviews collected from the students, and to infer about the causality of the assessment errors. The findings reveal that the assessment is explicitly designed from the vantage point of the mental map as a scarecrow. The data collected offer a multi-faceted interpretation: they demonstrate the erosion of the teacher's image within the Romanian society

© 2013 The Authors. Published by Elsevier B.V. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of PSIWORLD 2012

*Keywords:* learning practices, semiotic analysis, educational psychology, assessment, qualitative analysis;

---

## 1. Introduction

The national and international assessment literacy do not offer studies about semiotic analysis concerning the cognitive representation about assessment probably because of the preference to present how educational assessment affects individuals.

The concept of assignment is multifaceted in its nature as V. Trif (2011) states and is becoming internationalized; at the same time it is being locally internalized thus becoming more indigenous, more global, and more transnational. Considering the fact that the current trend manifested in assignment is that of endowing assessment with authenticity, we deemed it necessary to engage in a practical investigation in the Romanian axiological context. This qualitative research focused on the students' interviews has the following purposes: to

---

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +40-72-2403572; fax.  
E-mail address: [victoriatrif@yahoo.com](mailto:victoriatrif@yahoo.com).

identify the cognitive representation of assessment in Romania, to analyse the wording according to the Romanian cultural context, and to determine the causality of certain assessment flaws.

## 2. Method

The data had been collected by us, as follows: a first step in 2007 was to pretest the interview format for the investigation of the issue on a target population (approximately 130 subjects) comprising 1st and 2nd year students from the University of Bucharest. The pretesting conclusions were convergent with the need to retest the interview pretext and the investigation of a target population comprising exclusively 2nd year students. This final conclusion was about to be put into practice within the investigative approach during the following year since the investigation had to be doubled by a cognitive-type training suitable to the assessment theory and practice; given that the pedagogy syllabus did not allow approaching this subject any later than the 2nd academic year, the decision adopted by us was that of retesting the interview only with the 2nd academic year students. Secondly, in 2008, the interview was retested and furthered to a subsequent development stage of the cognitive training in the field of assessment (current assessment tendencies, real assessment conditions, alternate assessment methods, assessment errors, the relationship between the curriculum and assessment, etc.). Thirdly, during the year 2009 interviews were conducted on students in their 2nd academic year from various faculties within the University of Bucharest (Biology, Foreign languages, a. s. o.), focused on investigating personal erroneous assessment experiences. Mention should be made that the theoretical grounds of the investigative approach, structured in accordance with the latest assessment trends during 2006 were updated in 2009 in compliance with the most reputed specialty studies, thus ensuring the internationalization of assessment. Our qualitative approach is explored according to K. Punch (2009) and R. Gomm (2008) because of the difficulty to be subjective, interpretative, and scientific in discourses analyse.

## 3. Results

Even if – initially – this research was intended to be a landmark for building an authentic system designed to assess the auditors within the National Institute of Magistracy (addressed to the higher education), we consider that the dynamics and rethinking of the investigation from an addressability point of view (refocusing on the matter of issues surrounding assessment errors documented in high school education) are beneficial from the cultural perspective. The analysis of specialized pedagogic lectures illustrates that, most of the times, assessment deficiencies are quoted from various sources together with the necessary explanations without contextualizing them within the Romanian axiological space, ignoring the assessed' expectations, in the absence of exemplifications and without advancing any causal explanation.

We should state that this type of investigative approach, regardless of the fact that it is unique in Romania, has been facing a series of cultural misconceptions and stereotypes, just as we consider that the four years during which this research was prepared is a consistent period in view of avoiding risk situations. In this case it is about social learning according to social cognitive theory. We shall present the interviews collected emphasizing on the fact that, to the greatest extent possible, we have preserved the verbiage and punctuation of the subjects participating in the investigation.

S1: "At Physics, my first grade in high school was 3 (three) out of a mistake: the girl behind me kept asking me to give her the ruler; I turned around yelling at her and the teacher told me to stand up, asked me two questions but I didn't know the answers. Since then, every time we had classes I would go out to the blackboard and ask her to examine me; although I answered well, I would only get a 5. At the end of the semester she gave me two 10s, arguing I received them because I had been learning consistently the entire semester with each and every Physics class."

S2: “The schoolmaster gave me a 7 at a subject matter called ‘Handicraft’ given that almost all the other children got a 10. A gap was intended to exist between me and two other classmates so that the following year we might be relocated to another class. I should state that I had achieved my work in the same way as those who received maximum points. Upon taking the high school admission exam, I initially got 8.10 at the Geography test; I had expected at least a 9, which is why I chose to appeal and, as a consequence, my grade dropped to 7.25.”

S3: “I was downgraded despite the fact that my paper was similar to that of one of my high school class mates, during a Mathematics class.” “My grades at a Romanian language test paper during the 9th grade were doubled (the same grade was written twice in the class register).”

S4: “At history, due to the fact that the teacher was very demanding, I did not attend the class – he saw us through the window and started shouting at us. My classmates, when they saw him, left and the teacher ran after them. During the following class there was an oral assessment – he did not give any higher grades than 3. He asked them to be familiar with the book ‘from cover to cover’, despite he had only taught 5 lessons. After that event, he would assess them orally during each and every class and, naturally, he failed them at the end of the semester because he asked them questions (during the oral exam, the answers of which were neither in the course book nor had he taught.”

S5: 5.1 “At the end of the 5th grade I chose to take the exam in French hoping to catch a spot within the special French class. It was a test comprising various exercises, readings, grammar. The test seemed easy to me, and yet, the result was not I had expected. Nevertheless, I entered that 30-student list, being the very last one. 24 hours later I was called by the school principal who told me that, following an appeal, the student who had placed 31st climbed to the 30th spot. Needless to say, I was extremely upset since I had studied quite a lot for that exam. To my surprise, the one who had taken my place was a close relative of the teacher of French, who was going to become the form master of that class.

Passing exams and grades has been a practice ever since secondary school – what is more worrisome is that fact that even the school principal turns a blind eye, and support those corrupt teachers. Comment: At the end of secondary school the student, although a very good one, was advised by the teacher in question to opt for ‘The Automotive High School’, and not for ‘The Information Technology High School’, the latter being where had been actually admitted.”

S6: “During high school, our French teacher had a flawed assessment method from my point of view, which was marking only 3 or 4 pupils who answered during every class. The rest of the class “was asleep” and the students would wake up at the end of the semester with grades given out of the blue. I shall provide an example in this respect: there was a boy in the classroom who simply sat in his desk during French classes, nobody paying him any attention at all. At the end of the semester he saw in the class register two grades of 4 and the teacher failed him. Another example: at Mathematics, during secondary school, my girl desk mate and I did two identical test papers. She (the teacher) marked me with a 5 and her with an 8.”

S7: “In the 9th and 12th grades it happened to me once in a while, although I did test papers worthy of 9 or 10, to be given a smaller grade. If I did not look on the paper to see and challenge the grade in time, I was left with a lower grade. In the 12th grade, at one of the Mathematics semester test papers, I was actually given more difficult subjects than the rest of the class and, in the end, when the teacher brought them back to us, I had a 7, even though I had solved the given problems and deserved a 9. When I went to him with the paper he apologized, saying he was not attentive when adding up the points given.”

S8: 8.1 “In the 4th grade we were given a problem to solve; the first one to solve it received a 10. Although I was the first girl student to finish it, the second girl student who finished it got a 10 because she was the teacher’s favourite.”

8.2 During high school, in the 11th grade, at the Chemistry class, only the pupils in danger of failing to pass had to come. Although it was not my case, I went to class and the teacher gave us a test paper (the paper had to be given to the pupils found in that delicate situation).

8.3 “During faculty, in my 1st year, I gave my notes to a girl colleagues to write her laboratories for a certain subject matter as she had been absent, and at the time of marking, the teacher said I had cribbed from her and I was trying to fool her.”

S9: “It happened to me during the first semester, at histology, to be accused of cribbing, but I hadn’t cribbed even a single word, and when I asked the lady teacher to let me repeat -word for word everything I had written on the paper in order to prove that I hadn’t done that thing, she categorically refused. That is how I failed the exam out of a misunderstanding because some teachers cannot leave out their problems from home.”

#### 4. Discussion and data interpretation

In terms of M. A. K. Halliday this research draws a picture of the image of the school reality using language as social semiotics. This interpretative analysis assumed in our approach takes into account the elementary fact that “we all the time exchange meanings, and the exchange of meanings is a creative process” (Halliday, 1994: 4).

The qualitative analysis of these interviews demonstrates that the hypothesis assumed in the beginning of the current digression – the assessment issues are cognitively represented as a scarecrow – is validated. This cognitive representation about assessment according to social cognitive theory infers that social factors, cognitive factors, and behaviour play important roles in the relationship between teaching, learning and assessing. The data collected might be considered individual validations of the worse pedagogical practices of assessment in terms of social agency. In these instances according to J. Santrock (2008) “cognition influences behaviour, behaviour influences cognition, environment influences behaviour, behaviour influences environment, cognition influences environment, environment influences cognition” (pp.243). Learning and assessment experiences of the 1st academic year students, as well as the negative feedback, the quality of the educational process undergone, the “de-motivation” effect (lack of motivation) generated by a much too high a number of negative assessment practices, the dissociated approach of the learning activity from the expected specific results, the lack of teacher – student interaction in the classroom, the use routine-inducing assessment methods, the predominance of tribal interests (“educational inspectors”, “teachers” favouring their students, etc.) to the detriment of the black gold of outstanding performances (for instance, the case of medallists at national and/or international Olympiads) represent the most important analysis units differentiated by dint of interviews.

We should also state that the data collected allows for a multi-faceted interpretation: process deficiencies are logically organized (they do not have a random behaviour), they manifest independently from the professional ethos, are authentic (cannot be labeled as imaginative approach), demonstrate the erosion of the teacher’s image within the Romanian society due to material precariousness (salaries that are much too low), just as, many times, assessment is reduced to marking lacking consistency, the involvement of the local community and the parents in the educational activities being too scarce. From a linguistic and semiotic point of view, we realize that the vocabulary comprises words such as: mystery or “mysterious criteria”, “downgrading”, “prejudice”, “injustice”, “tension”, “frustration”, “abasement”, “displeasure”, “persecution”, “depression”, “relations”, “misunderstandings”, “grade decrease”, which mean the violation of human dignity, disappointment and situation of risk. In fact, the discursiveness of answers is also characterized by the usage of terms which, most of the times,

belong to the common language, and sometimes there is a revealing of available answers that are natural and open to the task since we identify slightly coloured words within the boundaries of decency.

## 5. Conclusions

These peculiarities of the narration, as well as the use of 1st person singular personal pronouns and pronominal adjectives, demonstrate, on the one hand, that the interview context was professionally created and might be replicated and disseminated within other action researches; on the other hand, for the ones learning to assess, they verify a complicity relation and simultaneously affect the individual form a cognitive and affective-emotional perspective. In fact this wording it is about observational learning that involves learning skills, strategies and beliefs by observing others. To conclude, the discourse analysis reveals uncommunicativeness between student and teacher, and the lack of comparability when grading and marking.

To conclude we present the practical relevance of the results as follows: media could be involved in changing the cognitive representation of assessment in Romania, the draft syllabus might link the curriculum and the assessment, it is necessary to avoid promoting a culture of dishonesty within Romanian classrooms.

## References

- Broadfoot, P. (2007). *An introduction to assessment*. Continuum: London.
- Gomm, R. (2008). *Social research methodology. A critical introduction*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Palgrave Macmillan: New York.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *Language as social semiotic. The social interpretation of language and meaning*. Edward Arnold: London & New York & Melbourne & Auckland.
- Punch, K. (2009). *Introducing to research methods in Education*. Sage: London & New York.
- Santrock, J. (2008). *Educational Psychology*. (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). Mc Graw Hill: New York.
- Satterly, D. (1992). *Assessment in schools*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Trif, V. (2011). *From assignment to curriculum*. (2nd edition). The University of Bucharest Publishing House: Bucharest.
- Trif, V. (2011). *Lesson planning. Good practices*. The University of Bucharest Publishing House: Bucharest.